In/visible—In/secure
Optics of regulation and control

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Abstract: In the introduction to this theme section we attempt to disentangle the webs of in/visibility and in/security by tracing out their diverse iterations. We construct a series of conversations between two of the four key terms relevant to this discussion—security and insecurity, visibility and invisibility—as a means of analyzing the different ways in which their various articulations engage meaningfully in the production and reproduction of contemporary security cultures. Ethnographic examples accompany each iteration, drawn from the work of contributors to this theme section, as well as from other contemporary research. These examples not only illustrate the multiple and shifting intersections of in/visibility and in/security in today’s security-minded world but also remind us of the unique contributions that anthropology can make to the critical study of security.

Keywords: ethnography, insecurity, power, security, surveillance

As a contribution to the development of the critical anthropology of security, this theme section explores the uncertain yet complementary relationships between security and visibility, or rather—to highlight the ambiguity of the connection—between in/security and in/visibility. On the one hand, security is (pan)optical. To identify threats and manage risks, states and other actors to whom security has been outsourced (Buur 2005; Comaroff and Comaroff 2006; Jaffe 2013) visualize insecurity through a set of shifting categorical lenses, marking and punishing those who fall through the gaps of a normative-legal grid. However, despite the importance of legibility (Scott 1998; Trouillot 2001)—which, in the extreme, represents a hypervisualization of the social terrain—the very production of security is contingent on invisibility (Goldstein 2016). Paranoid concealment and creative camouflage are the modi operandi of contemporary security regimes (Jusonyte 2015a), and the ability to manipulate visibility and to penetrate the opaque are key technodiscursive components of ongoing state projects of security. While visibility entails accountability to the law and subjection to its enforcement, processes occurring behind the scenes are often blurry and secretive. It is within these zones of obscurity, beyond the reach of the legal and the political, that security’s effective theater of operations is constituted (Agamben 2005; Masco 2014).
One of the central contradictions of contemporary security making is that, rather than providing assurance and guarantee, practices emanating from the invisibilized security zones often contribute to heightened insecurity. As the articles in this theme section illustrate, these practices range from the techno-science of abnormal behavior detection that underlies counterterrorism efforts (Maguire and Fussey, this issue) to pandemic disease reporting and data sharing between sovereign states and global public health institutions (Mason, this issue). The assemblage of militarized and plainclothes police and private security personnel—intimidating to some residents, reassuring to others yet unrecognizable to tourists—patrolling contested urban spaces generate similar effects (Grassiani and Volinz, this issue). Meanwhile, the public, media-staged performance of humanitarian militarism in the “pacification” of subaltern populations creates security for a few and insecurity for the many, along familiar lines of race and class (Savell, this issue). As global, national, and local institutions selectively deploy the tactics of in/visibilization to make security, their actions—intentionally or not—often produce fear and anxiety in targeted communities (Holbraad and Pedersen 2013; Jusionyte 2015b). By ethnographically tracing the dialectic between exposure and disguise, revelation and concealment, to the murky zones of political and ethnographic il/legibility, this theme section invites readers to reconsider the visual aesthetics, the discursive fields, and the politics and practices of contemporary security regimes.

As a prelude to the articles selected for this special section of Focaal, in what follows we attempt to disentangle the webs of in/visibility and in/security by tracing out their diverse iterations. That is, we construct a series of conversations between two of the four key terms relevant to this discussion—security and insecurity, visibility and invisibility—as a means of analyzing the different ways in which their various articulations engage meaningfully in the production and reproduction of contemporary security cultures. Ethnographic examples accompany each iteration, drawn from the work of contributors to this theme section, as well as from other contemporary research. These examples not only illustrate the multiple and shifting intersections of in/visibility and in/security in today’s security-minded world but also remind us of the unique contributions that anthropology can make to the critical study of security (Goldstein 2010).

Visibility :: Security

Over the past few decades, security—variously understood—has become a highly visible presence in the daily lives of people around the world. Walls have enclosed urban communities, from Sao Paulo in Brazil to Johannesburg in South Africa, promising their upper-middle class residents a sense of security while in fact amplifying fear of the criminal threat (Low 2003; Merry 1981). We observe the proliferation of cameras perched atop fences surrounding condos and warehouses, connected—we assume, though we can’t be sure (Frois 2013)—to sophisticated surveillance technologies, while gates to these “cities of walls” (Caldeira 2000) are manned by private security guards, shotguns in hand. Rarely if ever used, these intimidating weapons are displayed to discourage potential criminals from even attempting to penetrate the security perimeter around the citadels where the better-off live, work, and spend their money. A walk—or, more likely, a drive—through the cities of the Global South (from Tegucigalpa to Kabul to Nairobi) and the Global North (think of Los Angeles, CA, and Jacksonville, FL) takes us across an urban landscape that resembles a chessboard—neighborhoods that have been securitized into fortified enclaves are separated from areas that are considered (by the media, by politicians, and by citizens who circulate rumors about always emergent waves of crime) to be chaotic and lawless. These are the spaces of the underprivileged on the margins of the state (Das and Poole 2004), where poverty and illegality breed insecurity and instill fear among the powerful and the wealthy (Goldstein 2012).
Those who can afford “protection”—defined by the visible presence of walls, uniformed guards, cameras, checkpoints, and other technologies of security—excise their lives from the social fabric of unequal neoliberal democracies (Holston 2008). Meanwhile, the physical presence of police and other security makers in marginal spaces of insecurity serve as public demonstrations of the state at work, spectacularly performing security through the often violent work of policing (Fassin 2013; Goldstein 2004; Grassiani and Volinz, this issue; Savell, this issue).

Security is perhaps especially visible at national borders, many of which are imposed and maintained by force and violently contested (Grassiani and Volinz, this issue). Trying to uphold their fading sovereignty in an era of neoliberal globalization (Ong 2006), nation-states build fences to mark the edges of their legitimate domains. The prototypical example is the border wall in the US Southwest, which now stretches for nearly 700 miles across deserts, mountains, and towns and is the most visible and substantial instrument of the US securitization of the Mexican border (McGuire 2013). The steel and concrete barrier has become a central feature in borderland communities, dominating the visual landscape. Beginning with Operation Gatekeeper in California and replicated by Operation Hold-the-Line in Texas and Operation Streamline in Arizona, the state pursued a “prevention through deterrence” strategy that sought to limit the flow of drugs and people from Mexico into the United States by demonstrating the might of border fortifications (Cornelius 2001; Dunn 2009; Nevins 2010). With backup from surveillance technologies, including recent Border Patrol drones (UAVs, unmanned aerial vehicles), the border itself has been made manifest, a highly visible presence that attempts to reassure citizens of their own national security while deterring potential clandestine crossers, channeling them into treacherous wilderness terrain that itself serves as a kind of border “fence” (Heyman 2008). Hundreds have died along the way, their bones found next to empty water bottles and torn sneakers—a “side effect” of border security policies, exposed by humanitarian volunteers, human rights organizations, and medical examiners and made visible to the rest of us in photographs circulated by the press (De León 2012; Doty 2011; Jimenez 2009; Magaña 2008; Slack and Whiteford 2011). Other notable security fences include the concrete wall of the Israeli West Bank Barrier, famously decorated with graffiti by the artist and activist Banksy; the double row of fencing and electrified concertina wire between India and Pakistan in Kashmir; and the parallel fences with barbed wire along Ceuta and Melilla—two Spanish enclaves in North Africa—and neighboring Morocco (Aggarwal 2004; Andersson 2014; Ferrer-Gallardo 2008; Peteet 1996). Wendy Brown writes that visible, political walls like these are spectacles of power, which constitute “scenes of awe, rather than efficacy, and of force rather than right” (2014: 104). The same is true for fences surrounding numerous private and public detention centers housing undocumented migrants in the United States and in Europe (Bosworth 2011; Bosworth and Kaufman 2011; Richard and Fischer 2008)—the walls of nation-states have reached deep into the countries’ interiors, accompanying campaigns of immigrant securitization that extend well beyond the national frontiers (Glick Schiller and Caglar 2010; Kretsedemas 2008).

Security-making is not only acutely visible to citizens and noncitizens alike—the ostensible beneficiaries of public and private protection from crime and terror, or the sources of that terror. Security-making is itself predicated on visibility. The work of making security depends on those in charge being able to see and read “the human terrain” (González 2009; Price 2011). Security’s theater of operations functions like the Foucauldian panopticon—a mechanism of surveillance that can be automated because its subjects internalize control. CCTV cameras in London, for example, and the public video surveillance in cities like Lisbon and Jerusalem have enabled governments to justify their observation of public behavior as a form of security provision, purportedly protecting some
against the threats posed by others (Grassiani and Volin, this issue; Maguire, Frois, and Zurawski 2014). This security-making imposes burdens on those it claims to protect; it requires us to act “normally,” to make our bodies and our faces available for screening as we walk down to the subway, as we board planes, as we return home from a corner store. We are screened against lists of suspects “for our own safety” and are ourselves enrolled in the work of security provision through official exhortations to “See something, say something.” Our body language, our official documents, and our legal names must be legible and unblemished. Those who stand out—maybe because of a darker face covered by a hoodie, a long beard, or a hijab—are inherently cast as suspicious by the security gaze. If you have nothing to hide, these technologies assert, then show yourself, be transparent, cooperate. Security agents take our fingerprints and photographs at airports, while automated technologies match live camera feeds from public spaces with social media profiles. What security experts are looking for—as they sit and wait patiently behind the scenes at airports or mega sports events—is “matter out of place” (Maguire and Fussey, this issue): the underlying states and signs that cannot be detected by usual practices of ethnic or gender profiling but that require special skills to sense the abnormal. Mark Maguire and Pete Fussey (this issue) show how US and European counterterrorism professionals are trained at detecting suspicious behavior with the help of the latest biometric technologies with compelling acronyms—Future Attribute Screening Technology (FAST), Automated Virtual Agent for Truth Assessments in Real-time (AVATAR), and others—capable of capturing emotional states, deception cues, and signs of hostile intent. Governmentality meets biopower in the rendering of security through visibilization.

Invisibility :: Security

Security is a potentiality. It is future-oriented and preemptive. The threats against which security must act are not yet: today they are invisible, but it is impractical to wait until we can clearly see them because by then it will be too late. The US counterterrorism regime is thus structured around anticipation and preparedness to react to alternative future imaginaries (Masco 2014), carefully joining the concern with visibility to a recognition of the invisibility of security threats and the (supposedly necessary) invisibilization of efforts to combat them. The national security state, in both its anticommunist and its counterterrorist forms, rests its power on the ability of officials to mobilize threat in order to manage the public/secret divide. The counterterrorist state grounds its security strategy in the increased classification, noncirculation, and censoring of public records, the categorization of information as secret and hence invisible. But, as Joseph Masco (2010: 443) writes, “official secrecy is a social technology, a means of internally regulating and militarizing American society.” More than “just a technology of state power,” he adds, secrecy is also “the basis for a new kind of power: the ability to create new realities” (2010: 454). This power takes form, under the state of exception, in invisible places such as “camps” and “black sites”—prisons in unknown locations, operating outside ordinary domains of legality, housing unknown numbers of detainees in the global counterinsurgency war (Caton and Zacka 2010; Garces 2014). The contemporary politics of security is centered on preparedness for emergencies yet unknown—major natural disasters, chemical or biological attacks, disease epidemics—visualized and thus visibilized in training simulations designed to ensure the protection of critical infrastructures in all-hazards scenarios (Lakoff 2007) yet carefully kept screened from public view. Future emergencies are today’s unknowns. Therefore, any information that could fall into the wrong hands—such as scientific research on nuclear weapons (Gusterson 1996; Masco 2006) or infectious diseases (Caduff 2012, 2014)—is treated as a potential threat, preemptively securitized and invisibilized by withholding it from public circulation.
In/visible—In/secure

But the vital link between security and invisibility is not exclusive to the operations of state security. For some sectors of the population invisibility has become their only mode of making everyday security. While state security regimes classify undocumented migrants as akin to criminals and terrorists (Bigo 2002; Feldman 2011) and so arrest and detain them, invisibility becomes a cloak offering these same migrants protection from the state's securitizing gaze. Undocumented migrants adapt to life in the United States—which is increasingly structured around police checkpoints, disrupted by deportation quotas, and circumscribed by e-Verify and other migrant management technologies (Goldstein and Alonso-Bejarano n.d.; Stuesse and Coleman 2014)—through the selective deployment of invisibility. For them, remaining invisible to the state is a way of maintaining a certain degree of security from job loss, family separation, and the abuse of their basic human rights (Cleaveland and Pierson 2009; Gomberg-Muñoz 2011; Menjívar and Abrego 2012). However, this security is often achieved at a cost of personal safety and health: since the implementation of 287(g) and Secure Communities in many cities in the United States, unauthorized migrants have become wary of reporting crimes to the police, and as much as possible, they avoid other contacts with public service providers, including doctors (Gordon 2007; Pallares and Flores-Gonzalez 2010). In this sense, undocumented people in the United States and Europe are themselves invisibilized in much the same way as the residents of Rio de Janeiro favelas, described by Stephanie Savell (this issue): By refusing to testify against police brutality for fear of possible repercussions, favelados contribute to further erasing the hidden violence of the Brazilian state's military “pacification” campaigns (see below).

Invisibility :: Insecurity

The equation of security with visibility can also be inverted. A sense of insecurity can arise from fear of invisible threats. The classic case is the fear of contagion. AIDS, anthrax, SARS, H1N1, Ebola, and Zika have been the objects of only the more recent scares that presumably foretell an impending global epidemic. Fear of disease outbreaks and epidemics can cause sanitary panics, used by state authorities and international entities to justify a variety of security-making measures. In China, as Katherine Mason (this issue) shows, maintaining at least partial secrecy of data on disease outbreaks is seen as necessary to avoid chaos and social instability. Drawing from their previous experiences with SARS, during the 2009 H1N1 influenza pandemic Chinese public health officials feared that if people were exposed to too much information, which they could not correctly interpret, they would panic, possibly fleeing the large cities and thus spreading disease farther into the countryside. Different audiences—the inner circle of the public health bureaucracy, Chinese citizens at large, and global institutions—were therefore afforded uneven degrees of transparency as the government balanced between what Mason calls “performative hypertransparency” of a dramatized fight against the disease (the media focused on personnel in white biohazard suits pointing fever guns at hundreds of thousands of people passing through airports and border crossings) and “technologized hypertransparency” of sharing disease incidence data between local and national public health officials, where even with real-time reporting falsification of records was a “public secret.” Justified in terms of promoting public health, official efforts at concealment here augment the insecurity experienced by those left largely in the dark.

Politicians are particularly adept at co-opting anxieties caused by the invisible threat of disease to advance their agenda of intensified security buildup. Notably, calls to secure the US-Mexico border were loud during the 2014 Ebola outbreak in West Africa. Scott Brown, running for a US Senate seat from New Hampshire in the fall midterm elections, without evidence claimed that undocumented people were bringing the Ebola virus into the United States. “One of the reasons why I’ve been so adamant about
closing our border,” Brown stated, is “because if people are coming through normal channels, can you imagine what they can do through a porous border” (Robic 2014). Meanwhile in Europe, ultra-right-wing politicians like Jean-Marie Le Pen of France’s National Front party, suggested that Ebola could be a solution to a global “population explosion” and, by extension, help solve the continent’s “immigration problem” (Willsher 2014). In his research on the 1992–1993 cholera epidemic in Venezuela, Charles Briggs (Briggs and Mantini-Briggs 2003) describes how the epidemic established a distinction between “sanitary citizens” and “unsanitary subjects,” a discourse that proved effective in recruiting family members, neighbors, and coworkers of the infected to help the state police the boundary separating the sanitary from the unsanitary. A geography of blame linked poverty and cholera, giving rise to parallel practices of “racializing space and spatializing race” (Briggs and Mantini-Briggs 2003: 102), a phenomenon also observed by medical anthropologists studying fears of the AIDS epidemic (see Farmer 1992).

Invisibility and insecurity also collide in areas where the state’s presence is spectral (Goldstein 2012), that is, where the government fails or refuses to provide residents access to social and legal services, and where the lack of vital infrastructure—from potable water to electricity to sewers—is an everyday reality, but where state forces can kill with impunity. Such is the case in Rio’s favelas. Favela residents fall into the category of “disposable” people. Like illegal settlers on government or private lands in Paraguay, slum populations in urban India, or refugees from conflict zones in the Middle East stranded on the shores of southern Europe, favelados are reduced to “bare life” (Agamben 1998). As such they are invisible as full rights-bearing citizens; they are not awarded state recognition and legal protection and are, therefore, killable, their disappearances not recorded in official statistics. Savell (this issue) shows how the public performance of security—on national news, Brazilian military forces triumphantly take over urban neighborhoods from fleeing traffickers—obscures residents’ experiences of death and pillage in the favelas. Their stories are silenced, injustices overshadowed by the visibility of humanitarian militarism. Ben Penglase has described favela residents as living in a permanent state of “(in)security” or “ordered disorder,” created and maintained by both government agents and drug traffickers who assert their control by manipulating secrecy and by alternating between states of security and insecurity (2009: 47). In this context, “knowing how to live” entails “hedging one’s bets, obeying both the visible and invisible authorities” (Penglase 2014: 136).

The invisible and insecure are suspended in the state of exception, where they can be objects but not subjects of the law. They are also contained in spaces where they are invisible to citizen oversight. Chris Garces (2014: 462) has shown how in Ecuador, prisoners are held indefinitely in detention without sentencing and argues that this practice of “warehousing” transforms suspected criminals into “antisocial” noncitizens, creating “a new urban caste of abject legal subjects.” After the disappearance and presumed murder of 43 students from Ayotzinapa Teacher’s College in Guerrero, Mexico, in 2014, numerous mass graves with unidentified human remains were discovered, shedding light on the normalization of deaths that were never investigated by corrupt authorities. Invisibility and insecurity are perpetuated by government impunity. In Latin America, during the last wave of right-wing military dictatorships in Argentina (1976–1983), Bolivia (1971–1982), Chile (1973–1990), Brazil (1964–1985), Uruguay (1973–1985), and Paraguay (1954–1989), governments used forced disappearance as a common tactic of eliminating the enemies of the regime (Feitlowitz 1998; Park 2014; Robben 2005). Political activists, journalists, and human rights advocates were among those who were “disappeared,” invisibilized by abduction, torture, and execution, but it was their families and
friends who lived in a permanent state of insecurity. Not knowing what had happened to their loved ones, unsure whether they were dead or alive, relatives of the disappeared occupied a space of permanent uncertainty, afraid of their own neighbors and colleagues who were all potential spies for the regime. Other governments around the world have applied the same tactics of forced disappearance, turning societies into real-life demonstrations of Orwellian dystopia. Although many security secrets of powerful states remain obscured to us, now and then we are given a rare chance to bear witness to the extent of these brutal behind-the-scenes terror apparatuses, as when millions of pages of Guatemala’s National Police archives were discovered by human rights activists in 2005, shedding light on the tools of state repression during the 36-year-long civil war (Weld 2014).

Visibility :: Insecurity

Finally, visibility can cause insecurity. Erella Grassiani and Lior Volinz (this issue) describe how security agents (i.e., police officers, soldiers, and private guards) engage in aggressive public performance to discipline Palestinian residents in the Old City of Jerusalem. Officers wearing bulletproof vests, helmets, and other body armor openly display their presence to show that they are locally in charge, with the authority of the state to back them up. But, living under constant surveillance and frequently harassed by the police, Palestinians have become equally skilled at recognizing plainclothes agents, identifiable from such cues as their specific way of walking. Either way, the very visibility of these security actors creates insecurity for the Palestinians who are their targets. Furthermore, the visible presence of multiple security actors and technologies in the streets of Jerusalem has multiple audiences: Grassiani and Volinz show that what one audience (i.e., Palestinians) perceives as aggression and intimidation, another audience (Israeli Jews) perceives as security. This observation—that the visibility of the security apparatus and security practices can produce both security and insecurity simultaneously, depending on the perspective and positionality of those protected and those targeted by it—can be expanded and applied to reinterpret scenarios that we discussed in previous sections. Gated communities, detention centers, border walls, surveillance cameras, disease reports, and counterterrorism technologies, among other everyday security arrangements, provide security to some while creating insecurity and vulnerability for others. Security’s logic is based on dichotomies, dividing “us” from “them.” Visibility and invisibility are key tools that security uses to enforce the separation between these empty categories.

The current situation of unauthorized migrants in the United States presents a different scenario for how visibility is linked with insecurity. Recent government policies that grant undocumented migrants temporary legal status require them to enroll in the program, thereby providing the authorities with lists of names, addresses, and other personal information of those who are in the country illegally. Some migrants and their advocates fear that applying for temporary work permits or visas will make them legible to the state and, if government policies change, enable the state to easily track them down and deport them (see Goldstein 2014). This example points to the ways in which state policies can invert the optical strategies of those seeking to deploy invisibility to their own benefit, encouraging exposure that can produce new forms of vulnerability among the chronically insecure.

Social movements around the world—including environmental, antigovernment, and antiglobalization movements—face a similar dilemma. On the one hand, use of social media, such as Twitter and YouTube, allows these groups to mobilize others for their causes, bypassing official media channels and governmental censorship while bestowing on them a certain degree of legitimacy in the eyes of global citizens follow-
ing events from afar (Juris 2012; Postill 2014). Their visibility brings legitimacy, which can translate into security. However, this exposure of grassroots and opposition activists that new social media enable comes with risks. When in 2013 Edward Snowden leaked classified NSA data to the media we learned about the extent of the US-run global surveillance apparatus, which included government access to private e-mail accounts. As public information-sharing platforms, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and other social media are even more susceptible to co-optation by the state security system that seeks to identify and track down its opponents. Visibility can thus be a source of insecurity for those who willingly reveal themselves to the security state (Jusionyte 2015b).

In/visible :: In/secure

The preceding analysis argues that the flexible relationship between in/security and in/visibility is a critical element of the state security apparatus and its pervasive power in contemporary global society. Security optics tactically manipulate illumination and obscurity, focus and blurring, to achieve their goals of regulation and control. As our discussion has tried to make clear, the relationship of in/security and in/visibility is inherently ambiguous and shifting; neither visibility nor invisibility is necessarily more or less conducive to security-making operations. In fact, security as a global instrument of power and control requires this contradiction, as states demand full visibility from those they attempt to regulate while working to preserve and justify their own techniques of invisibilization. Similarly, those whom the security apparatus attempts to manage do not merely internalize the various mechanisms of perception and control that the security apparatus deploys. Rather, they creatively adapt to such dual optics, making use of blind spots and blurred edges to achieve some degree of security within the contours of their daily lives. The four articles included in this theme section ethnographically examine specific sites where in/security and in/visibility converge.

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References


